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Department of
Agriculture

Soil
Conservation
Service

Interviews with Chiefs of the Soil Conservation Service: Williams, Grant, Davis, and Berg

Edited by Steven E. Phillips and Douglas Helms

Economics and
Social Sciences
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Cover contains photos of the four SCS chiefs interviewed in this volume:

Top left: Donald Williams
Top right: Kenneth Grant
Bottom left: Mel Davis
Bottom right: Norm Berg

Cover designed by Jimmy Todd, SCS

Photos: courtesy of the SCS Office of Public Affairs

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Introduction

Here, with varying degrees of candor, is the story of the Soil Conservation Service, told by four men who ran the agency from the Eisenhower to the Reagan administrations, a period of about thirty years. First came the late Donald A. Williams, who had the formidable task of managing the long-term development of the Service after the tenure of its crusading founder, Hugh Hammond Bennett. Next Kenneth E. Grant led the agency as environmental concerns grew and urban or suburban citizens demanded more assistance. Under Mel Davis, the Service attempted to cope with the expansion of land in production agriculture (largely a consequence of large grain sales to the Soviet Union) even as budgetary pressures increased. Finally, Norman A. Berg steered the agency during a time of renewed interest in environmental concerns. He was also the last "career chief," that is, he worked his way up the ranks of the Service to the top position. (Note: the title for the top position in the Service has switched between "chief" and "administrator.")

We edited these interviews with a light hand so as to give the reader a feel for the conversational style of each man. We endeavored to transmit not only what they said but also how they said it.

Several themes tie their tenures together. From its initial emphasis on soil conservation on agricultural land, the Service has steadily expanded into areas like flood prevention and rural economic development. Each chief sought to accomplish these new tasks while maintaining the agency's traditional role of service to farmers. Perhaps the most contentious issue was, and is, the perceived conflict between economic development and environmental protection. This is clear in disputes over the use of structural measures for flood control, channelization, and agricultural chemicals. Other common issues include the organization of the Service and relations with Congress and the White House.

Readers seeking to learn more about specific issues or programs discussed in these interviews are advised to turn to *Readings in the History of the Soil Conservation Service* (Historical Notes Number 1, 1992) by National Historian Douglas Helms.

We would like to thank Messrs. Williams, Grant, Davis, and Berg. Each graciously gave of their time, both for the interviews and to review the transcripts. Barbara Cook and Sheree Gross of the Economics and Social Sciences Division (ECN) cheerfully helped with the tedious task of transcribing the interview tapes. Nancy Mathews and Anne Henderson of Strategic Planning Division, as well as Jennifer Harr and Leigh Ann Mays of ECN made valuable suggestions for improving the readability of the text. Finally, we greatly appreciate the efforts of Claudette Hayes of the Service's Publication and Printing Branch, who has managed the printing of this and earlier volumes in the Historical Notes series.

Steven Phillips
Historian

Douglas Helms
National Historian

Donald A. Williams

Contents

Part Three: June 14, 1981

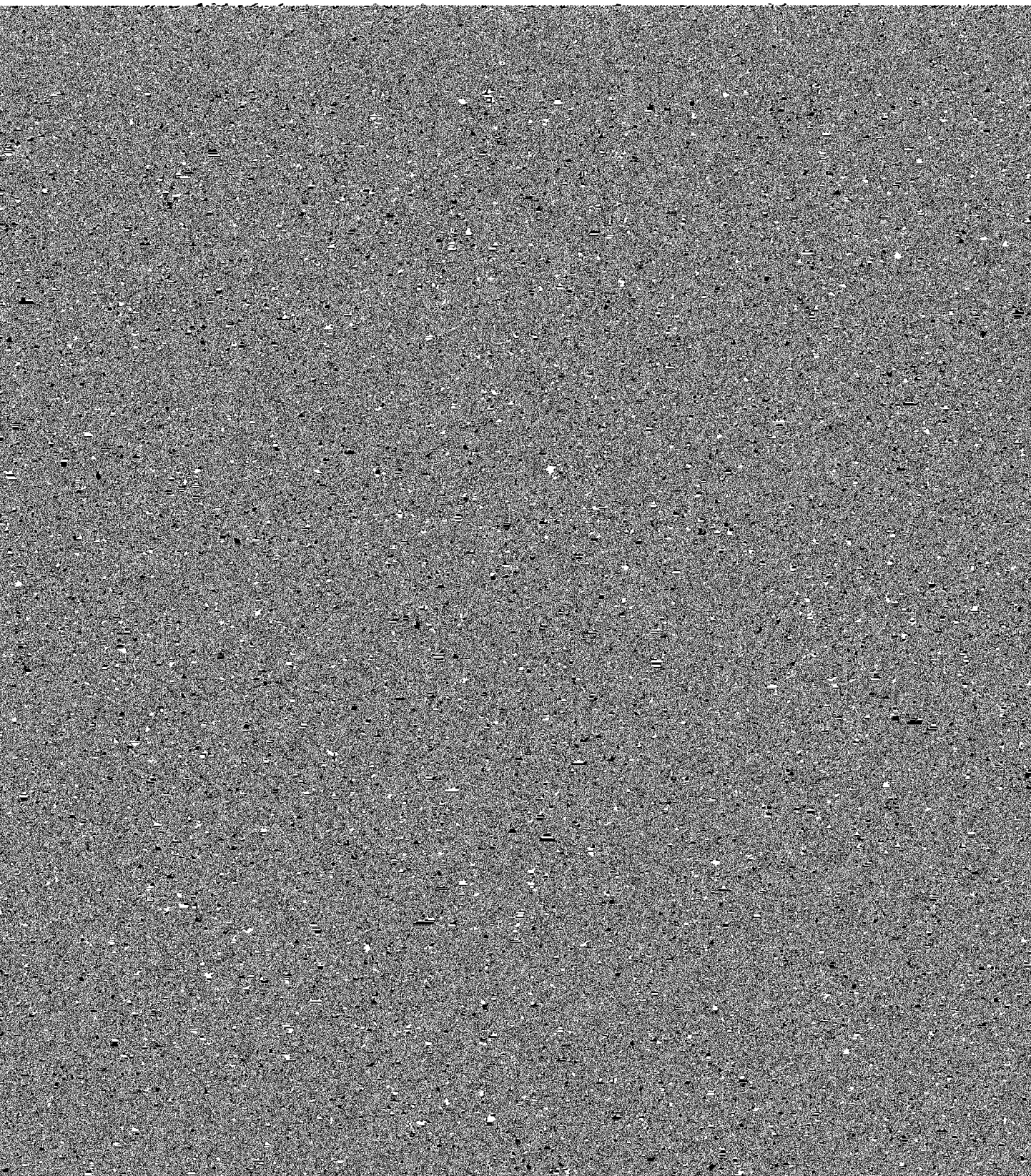
Biographical Sketch

Donald A. Williams was born in Clark

Conservation Program Service until the Secretary of Agriculture appointed him administrator of the Soil Conservation Service on November

was selected as a fellow and life member of the Soil Conservation Society of America and of the American Society of Civil Engineers, and a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The Soil Conservation Society of America established a fellowship in conservation in his name in 1969. Donald Williams passed away in November of 1982.

HELMS: What led you to a career in soil and water conservation and how were you recruited by the Soil Conservation Service? I guess that



accepted the job of camp superintendent at Presho, South Dakota, and I found out for the first time what a CCC camp was when I arrived there

knowledge and my acquaintance with the broad aspects and purposes of soil and water conservation was very limited while I was a CCC camp superintendent.

HELMS: From your observation, where did the Civilian Conservation Corps succeed the most: unemployment relief, protection of resources, or the social good of the enrollees?

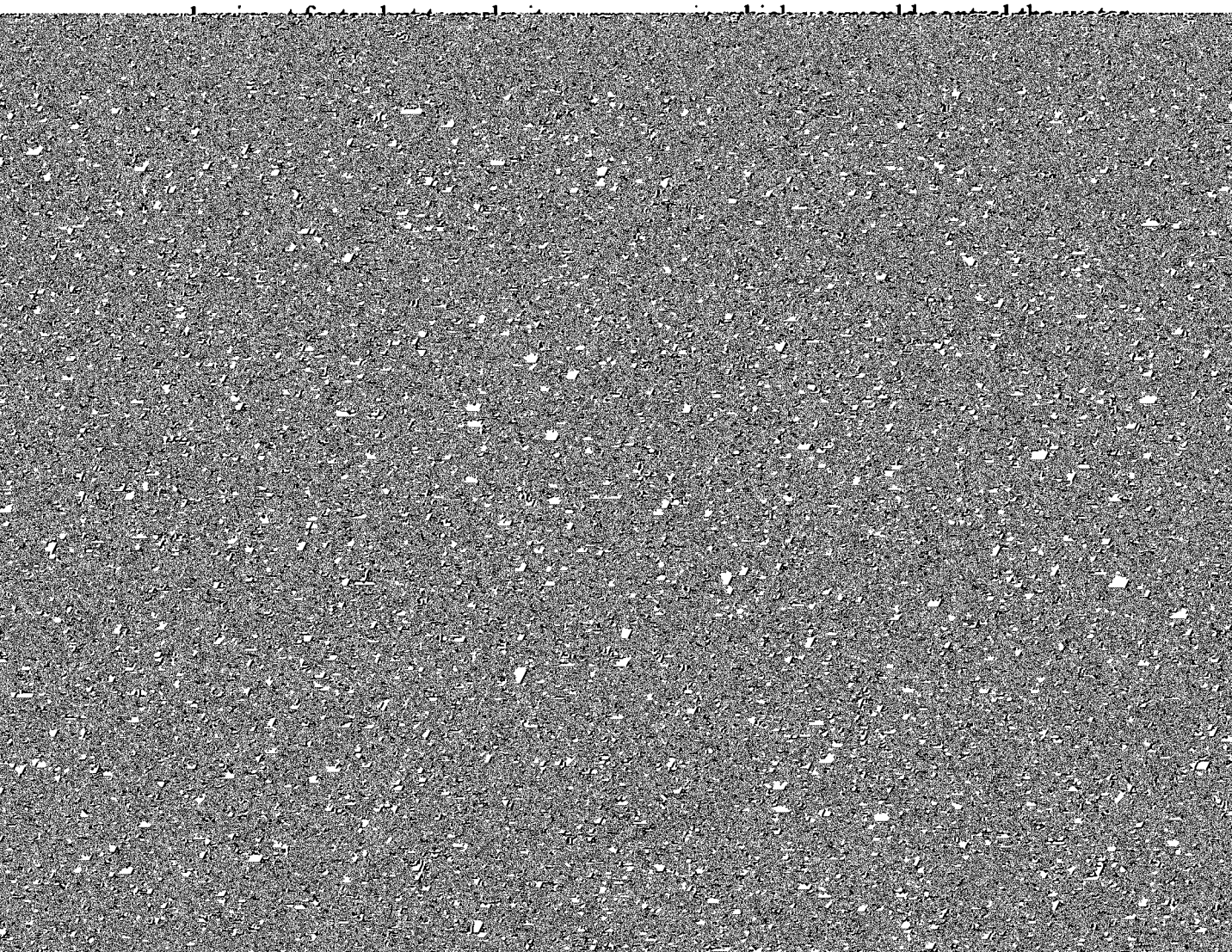
WILLIAMS: From my own observation, from the camps that I knew then and for the next few years, they were mostly for unemployment relief. I think, secondly, I would put the social good of the boys. I think they did some real good on that score, especially where the foreman and educational advisors had been carefully selected and where the camps were well operated by the U.S. Army. Protection of resources for the first camps that I was acquainted with was an almost insignificant matter. If these camps had been in the forest or in areas where there were active gullying problems and check dams to be built, the concept and approach would have been different. In other words, it depended on the location of these camps. At the five hundred that were under SCS--SES (Soil Conservation Service--Soil Erosion Service) at the time, there were either conservation problems on cultivated land or rangeland or forest land where certain practices could be applied and were applied. Before my career as a field engineer was over with, I was looking after that kind of work at a number of the CCC camps, particularly in the Pacific Northwest. We had WPA (Works Progress Administration) labor to look after and it was forced upon us. I was just suddenly told that I had two hundred men out of Great Falls, for example, that I had to supervise. During the drought period of the 1930s in eastern Montana I was told that we had to put fifteen hundred men to work with their teams and we had to get scrapers and so forth and put them to work building dams. It was a make-work proposition, but we did get it conservation oriented in so far as water opportunities were concerned.

My knowledge of conservation was, at that time, pretty much limited to engineering. It was not until later that some of these things became more evident. In the early days of the CCC camps and WPA labor we did some of the things we later were ashamed of. Temporary check dams built of wire and straw were put in gullies that would wash out when the first big rain came along. Well, we did not have any money and we could not get any from the cooperating farmers because they were just letting us on their land by the grace of God to put the boys to work. It was not their program; it was a government program. Sure they agreed to maintain it, but then whenever a dam washed out, they would call the government to come and fix it. I would say that the large amount of gully control work that was endeavored to be done with engineering types of structures was one of the

biggest flops of the early days. There were things done that were not right in terms of not paying enough attention to water conservation. It became evident to me when I began to really find out about conservation objectives and purposes that you could not do soil conservation work unless you also did water control or water conservation work in connection with it, unless you were just in a wind erosion area where the wind was the factor.

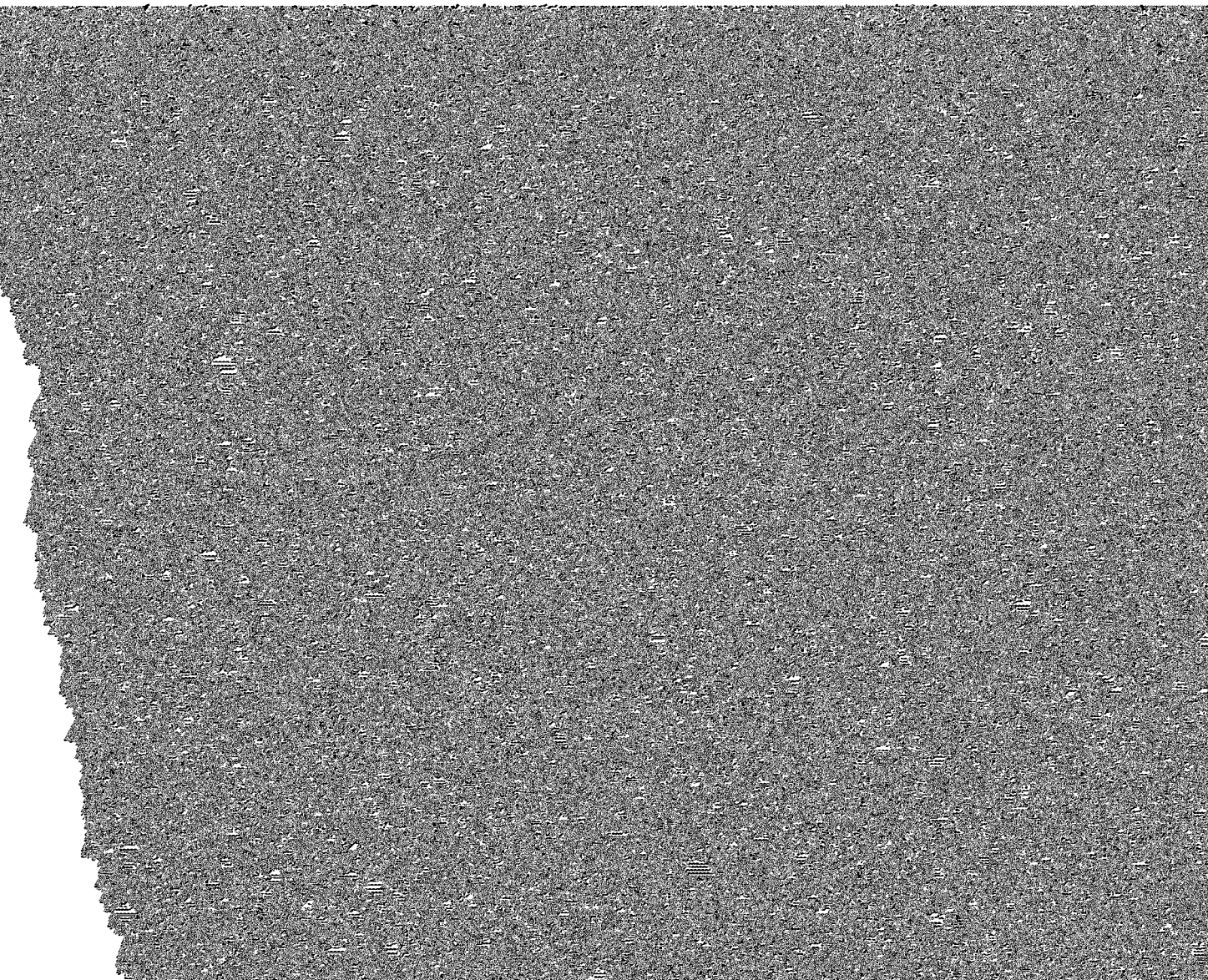
My interest in conservation largely developed on the water side of the soil and water conservation program. My goal was not to make engineering the

trying to get rid of the water. Later they found out in the Southeast they needed to conserve it too. But in the beginning that is the way it was. In the beginning days there was practically no attention paid to the irrigated land. People thought that if the farmers had irrigation, then the problems are all taken care of. But some of the most severe erosion was taking place on irrigated land because of running the water too long on too steep slopes and furrows or not using the right amount of water for the particular soil type or the particular crop. We developed what we called later conservation irrigation practices



formed the basis of my international consulting work in India, Turkey, and New Zealand and various other places on how to manage water through drainage or through application of water to match the soil type, the crop type, and the quantity needed, at the time needed, to bring efficiency into the picture in a safe, productive way. Conservation irrigation practices became a major part of the technical program in the Soil Conservation Service over a period of time. That became the definition of "soil and water conservation" as far as irrigated

WILLIAMS: Yes, that was the early emphasis during the CCC camp period. When we had all this labor to take care of from WPA during the relief labor days, we were forced into an engineering type program. "Build something that will use labor." I used to take WPA labor and clean the silt out from under a farmer's fences. That was not building anything because it would blow right back in again, but that was all we had for them to do. Then we would be laughed at for using WPA labor for that kind of stuff, you see. But what



the demonstration area projects to the conservation district approach. How did you view that?

WILLIAMS: I want to say something about that, Doug. I was in on the very earliest days of that, of course, because the Standard Soil Conservation Districts Act came in 1937. I was in the Pacific Northwest

farm." Some of these farm conservation plans evolved way back there in the late 1930s. I would say the ones we had on the demonstration farms were not real conservation plans. They were government plans. But the soil conservation plans which were the farmers' plans, with technical guidance from SCS, tied in his problem, his capability, his resources

entire field, somewhere between 10 or 15 percent of the total number of soil conservation districts, which is now some twenty-nine hundred or something, were outstanding in their leadership and their capability and their pulling people in. We had about the same number on the other end of the totem pole. They were kind of dead on their feet. It was partly the fault of the Service in generating leadership and it was partly the fault of the local people in electing people who did not want to work as a supervisor in the first place.

HELMS: Can you tie that to a region of the country as to which were more energetic or is there no pattern to it? Can you have one conservation district here with good leadership and then one next to it without it?

WILLIAMS: There is a real reason for it in my opinion--the background of education. In the early years that work trying to talk somebody into something, he would be a weak supervisor. A lot of the responsibility came back to the Service and how good an educational job it did. But it also hinged to a large extent on what we used to call finding the right "Elmer," finding the right local leader to work with. If you got the right local leader to work with in terms of getting him interested, he could get it out in the community.

If there had been soil conservation districts when I was a boy and my dad was busy in farming, he would have been a local leader because he was a fellow who was on the school board. He was on the township board. He was on this and on that. He did more work for his community than he did for himself. That is why we never got rich. But, he liked to work with people. He liked to work with boys. That is why he went to South Dakota State University and helped them

Then it depends upon the capability and the energy and the drive of the local conservationists.

The local soil conservation technician took on a responsibility that should have been the responsibility of the district supervisors of pushing the program and getting people interested in it and trying to do the whole thing. We soon found out that some of them were very adept at it and some were not. We knew that in every case, even with the best leadership of farmers, we had to have good conservationists out there to even keep up with the parade, to keep current, and to keep ahead of them. This necessitated that the Service set up in the very early days a training program for its field people. Not just training in how to seed or how to plant trees or how to irrigate or how to do the technical things which were also needed, but in how to work with people, how to give leadership, how to develop their interest in conservation. You know you go out and ask a man, "You are not interested in conservation, are you?" He will tell you, "No." But if you go at it the other way, he will say, "Yes." So we had to teach them how to get the answer to be "Yes." When we give further consideration to training, this was the reason why, in the early days, the Service recognized that we had to have a good strong training program within the Service to keep current and to work with other people.

HELMS: During World War II, did attempts to increase food supply cause setbacks in taking submarginal land out of production, specifically in the area where you happen to have been located at the time?

WILLIAMS: Yes. I remember very distinctly some of the things that transpired during World War II. The government encouraged--properly so, in the national interest--that all land that was suitable be put under cultivation. The farmers, many without proper knowledge or proper guidance, plowed up land that should never have been plowed because it was not suitable for crop production. It was too shallow, too sandy, or too droughty to go into cultivation. Millions of acres of it were out in the high plains country or breadbasket country of the United States, the wheat basket. There was an awful lot, some fourteen or fifteen million acres of land, that should have never been plowed out of grass that was plowed and put into wheat. Fortunately for the farmers they had a year or two of pretty good rain and they produced a crop. Then the drought hit and the wind started. We got into the hazards of wind erosion again in spite of the early wind erosion control programs that had been carried out.

HELMS: During your time as assistant regional director in the Pacific region, what conservation problems did the Service attack successfully? On the other hand, what

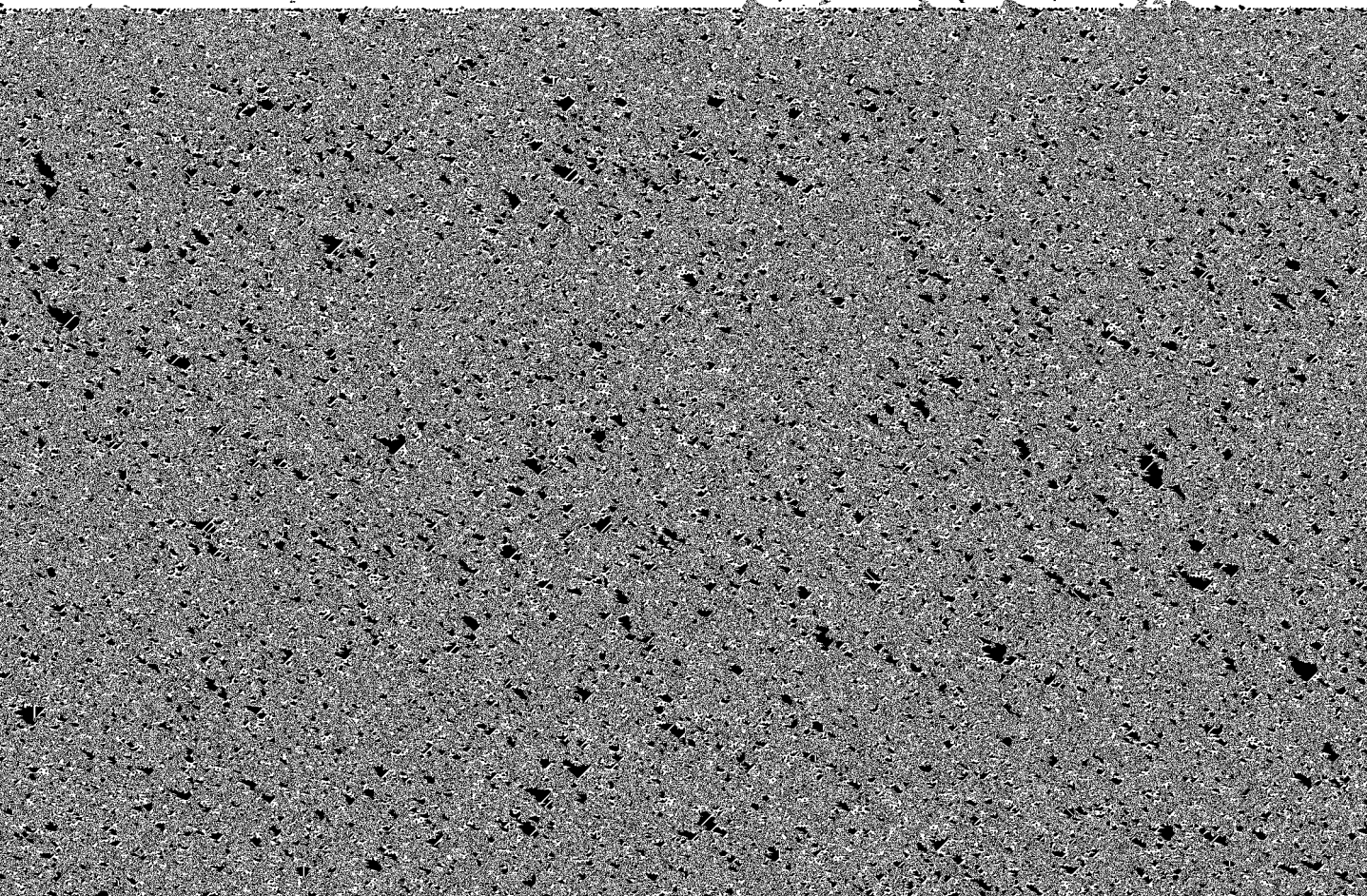
problems persisted either because of physical conditions or landowners' practices?

WILLIAMS: I could write a book on that one, but I will not. I will try to keep it as brief as possible. In the Pacific Northwest, the entire Pacific Coast area actually, we had had one of the most outstanding plant materials specialists that the Service ever had, a man by the name of Dr. A. L. Hafenrichter, an agronomist with tremendous experience in breeding plants for conservation objectives, and areas and non-irrigated sections, was water conservation. This was why, as an engineer, the challenge of uncontrolled water, either too much of it from flooding, from storms, or too much irrigation water, or lack of controls, or the improper use of the irrigation water became such a challenge to me. I found early in the game that it was possible--by knowing the kind of soil you had, the texture and depth of the soil, the rooting characteristics of the plants that you wanted to grow, and something about their water requirements by growth

through its technical influence. On the private lands we had information from our plant materials work on what it took to grow grasses and legumes and the kind of grazing practices. We developed some very simple, practical approaches that farmers and ranchers could understand. In other words, the principle of "take half and leave half." You let the cattle graze half the climax not worry so much if they lost some soil. But the slopes were so steep and the rainfall was usually adequate so that very seldom if ever was there a complete crop failure due to drought. Many of those lands were too steep to be cultivated, but practically all were plowed up and cultivated. Our big battle there was to try to get some of these steepest, most vulnerable lands

well as self-leveling combines. They could harvest any steepness of slope. When those things came along it just about knocked the conservation ideas in a cocked hat. As an engineer, I laid out many, many miles of what we called diversion terraces. We built those diversion terraces on a slight gradient around some of the hills on the longer slopes. We built them so high that they could not crawl over them with the machinery, so they had to plow between them on the contour. We got quite a lot of farms done. Particularly in the Walla Walla, the Blue Mountain topography of the states of Washington and of Oregon, we got a lot of those diversion type terraces done. But the Palouse remains to this day one of the great unaccomplished conservation areas in

WILLIAMS: I would say we were more successful with the sheep farmers in the range country than the cattle farmers, with the exception of the sandhill country in Nebraska, which is one of the greatest grazing areas of the whole world. In the sandhill country of Nebraska, the soils are too sandy to be cultivated. They blow. That is cattle grazing country. Almost every farmer has taken seriously and profitably the conservation recommendations on the management of that land, the management of the grasses, the kinds of grasses to use for different situations, different exposures and different soils so that our grazing management program in the sandhill Nebraska area has been highly successful. It is not limited to that.



public domain or the U.S. Forest Service on their area. They still used the idea of so many cattle permitted for a certain size area.

HELMS: During your water conservation work in the Pacific Northwest, did the cost of water for irrigation affect the adoption of your recommendations?

WILLIAMS: Not very much. Of course, in California, the cost of irrigation water is comparatively very high, particularly in southern California where they must import their water from Colorado and so forth. They are a lot more careful with it down there than they were up in Idaho where they just diverted it out of the stream and it practically cost them nothing. The cost of water was a factor in that they were inclined to use more than they needed because it was so cheap. Actually there are very few places in the United States or the world for that matter where the cost of

HELMS: Was the development of plant materials for the Pacific Northwest region mostly plants for hillsides and arid areas? What were the main problems they were trying to attack?

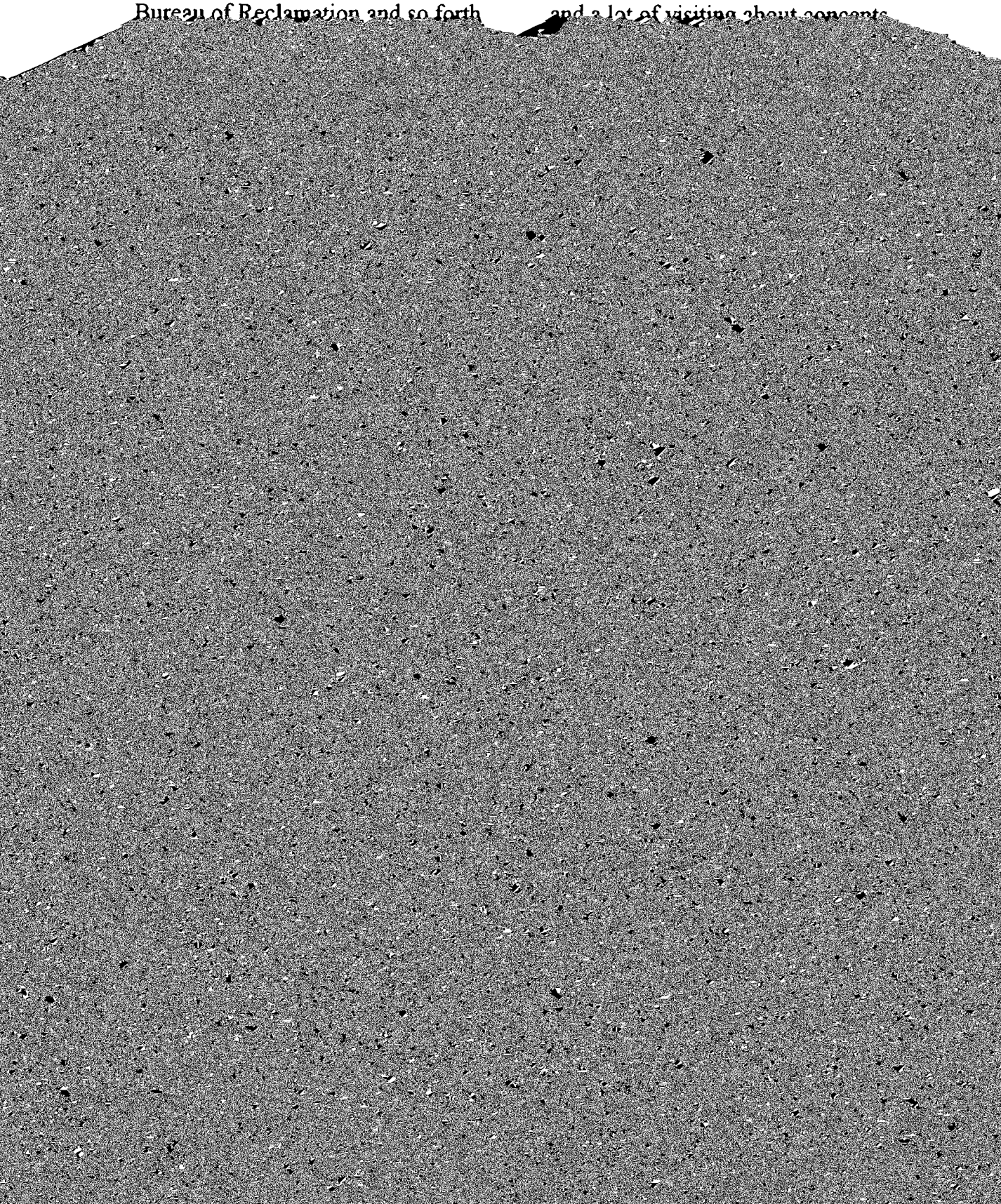
WILLIAMS: First, we hoped to develop perennial type plants that would do well in given climatic and soil situations. We wanted them to have a productive value if they were on land that should be used. We also had the problem of land that was so steep that it should not be used even for grazing. We developed plants there that were unpalatable. Both of these things were done: legumes that would add nitrogen to the land and proper rotation of grassed areas. We used to call it a brome grass, a clover combination. It is not always brome grass but some kind of grass. It was developed for the rangeland areas or the land that was to stay in grazing lands that would take a certain amount of abuse and would stand up under

WILLIAMS: There were several reasons. In the first place, there were some philosophical differences as to

WILLIAMS: It was against the basic philosophy of the Soil Conservation Service for the government to buy

Administration, to flood control by the Corps of Engineers, work by the Bureau of Reclamation and so forth

around for a few days. We did a lot of chauffeuring and a lot of talking and a lot of visiting about concepts



Part Two: June 2, 1981

HELMS: Mr. Williams, when we finished last time you were explaining why you were selected to come to Washington. I think we had gotten to a point where Charles Brannan, the Secretary of Agriculture, had called you.

WILLIAMS: Yes, Doug, Secretary Brannan called me sometime after that field trip and wanted to know if I would take a staff position of limited duration in his office in charge of flood control surveys and flood prevention responsibilities at USDA. I respectfully declined his offer because I liked it so much in the Pacific Northwest and liked what I was doing. But he did not want to accept that so he asked me to make a trip to Washington. He wanted to talk to me. I did so and I thought up all the reasons I could why I should not accept it. When I went to his office and sat down, he leaned back in his chair and listened while I talked about half an hour. Then he asked me how my health was and I said, "Pretty good." And he said, "When can you report?" He had already cleared it with Dr. Bennett to release me from the Service. So I was appointed. That appointment was for one year. I went from that appointment back to the Service one year later when A. E. (Amwell) Jones, then chief of operations, resigned because of poor health. Dr. Bennett asked Charlie Brannan to release me to become assistant chief of the Service. That was one year before Chief Bennett retired.

HELMS: What were your duties as the flood control survey officer?

WILLIAMS: This was in the beginning of the activities under the so-called eleven river basin or watershed projects. The first eleven projects were activated by the Service as a result of Congressional action. The surveys had been made many years earlier. They included several basins in the country, some in California, some in Mississippi, and one big one in Iowa. These projects were to be the foundation for updating the surveys. The Soil Conservation Service in cooperation with the Forest Service and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics had prepared updated reports. It was my function, working with those agencies, to review those reports and presumably to get them ready to transmit to the Congress. This extended over quite a period of time. It brought up many controversial matters in view of the fact that the concepts of the earliest surveys were not the concepts that later evolved in terms of getting more attention to retardation of water flow through small reservoirs. It dealt almost exclusively with land treatment which included land treatment practices and reforestation and so on. It was our opinion that the surveys should be expanded to include a broader program. It was my function

to review for the Secretary those reports and to give the blessing to them for their transmittal to Congress.

HELMS: Were you fairly well pleased with the final product of the reports?

WILLIAMS: No. The final products were too bulky, too detailed, and too complicated for ready reading. I suppose very few people ever found out what was inside them, rather than the summary pages. By that time, certain key members of the Congress were sufficiently well acquainted with the objectives of the projects initiated out in the field that there really was not any problem of having them authorized in any event. That process did take place in Congress.

HELMS: Do you recall who in particular in Congress was most interested?

WILLIAMS: That was still while Congressman Clifford Hope was Chairman of the Agriculture Committee on the House side. He was a Republican and always a leader. Bob Poage from Texas was a leader on the other side, and also some of the Oklahoma delegation. They could see more positive results coming from it in the early days. Then there were some lay leaders from Nebraska, the governor's office and so on, who were very helpful at that time in pushing the concepts. And I should mention Congressman Ben (Benton F.) Jensen of Iowa who was a strong supporter.

HELMS: You went back to the Soil Conservation Service. Not long thereafter you were appointed head of the Agricultural Conservation Program?

WILLIAMS: When the change of administrations from the Truman Administration to the Eisenhower Administration took place in 1953, following the 1952 election, Ezra Taft Benson was appointed as Secretary of Agriculture. He proposed in October of 1953 a significant organizational change, a number of them, in the Department of Agriculture. Many of these affected the research activities, but among the ones that affected the Soil Conservation Service was the elimination of the regional offices of the Service. This was very strongly opposed by Dr. Bennett and by lay leaders, soil conservation district supervisors and others around the country. They were afraid that the breakdown of the regional offices would deteriorate the technical competence of the Service. In any event, the announcement was made in early November that the reorganization would go forward. Among other things, the Agricultural Conservation Program split away from the old Production and Marketing Administration and was set up as a separate agency. I was asked to be the acting administrator on a loan basis from the Soil Conservation Service to head up that activity until some full-time regular appointment was made. That loan lasted for nine months. I went back to the Soil Conservation

Service at the time that Dr. (Robert M.) Salter, who had succeeded Dr. Bennett as chief, resigned. This was when the reorganization was announced. Salter resigned and I was asked to take over the Soil Conservation Service the next day.

HELMS: On that same question, who asked you to head up the Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP)?

WILLIAMS: Secretary Benson. I do not remember whether it was he personally or Assistant Secretary James Earl Coke. It was one of the two of them.

HELMS: Was that an attempt to increase cooperation between the SCS and the ACP and link those closer?

WILLIAMS: I do not know that that was a primary motive. It might have been an incidental motive. I think they were more inclined to try to see if there could be a stronger, more valid cost sharing activity with the money going toward more enduring conservation practices than had been the historical case. The historical case had been that so much money had gone for temporary practices like fertilization, lime and so forth. It was the desire of the Benson administration to see the money go into more permanent, enduring things that would last over a period of time.

HELMS: When were you selected as administrator of SCS? Who was responsible for that? Benson?

WILLIAMS: I went back as administrator of SCS. That was when the reorganization took place really. The transfer to ACP or the loan to ACP took place in the early months of 1953. Nine months later, in November of 1953, was when the reorganization took place. It was on a Sunday afternoon when Benson called me at home and asked me if I would take over the Soil Conservation Service the next day. I told him only on one condition. That was if he was through reorganizing it and would let me operate it. I was not going to take it with the idea of having it disintegrate further.

HELMS: Did you encounter any difficulties in administering a Service that had been so identified with one man? There were some Federal agencies that one man built up and the people were very loyal to him.

WILLIAMS: No. There were no particular difficulties. There were a few of the old, old timers who had more or less grown up with Bennett who philosophically, I think, resented seeing anybody take his place. But Bennett was never known to be a good administrator. He was a technical man, a professional man and noted worldwide for his capabilities in that regard. I had established something of a reputation of being able to say "yes" or "no" and have some good reasons

for it. I think I was accepted rather universally as the administrator. The

HELMS: There were other people involved other than Benson in wanting

research work that "we found out we could work with them." This was sort of what happened in this case!

HELMS: I believe in your time there the land utilization projects were transferred to the Forest Service. Were you responsible for that?

WILLIAMS: I was not responsible for it, but I had a lot to do with

HELMS: Could you tell us about the conception and enactment of the Small Watershed Program?

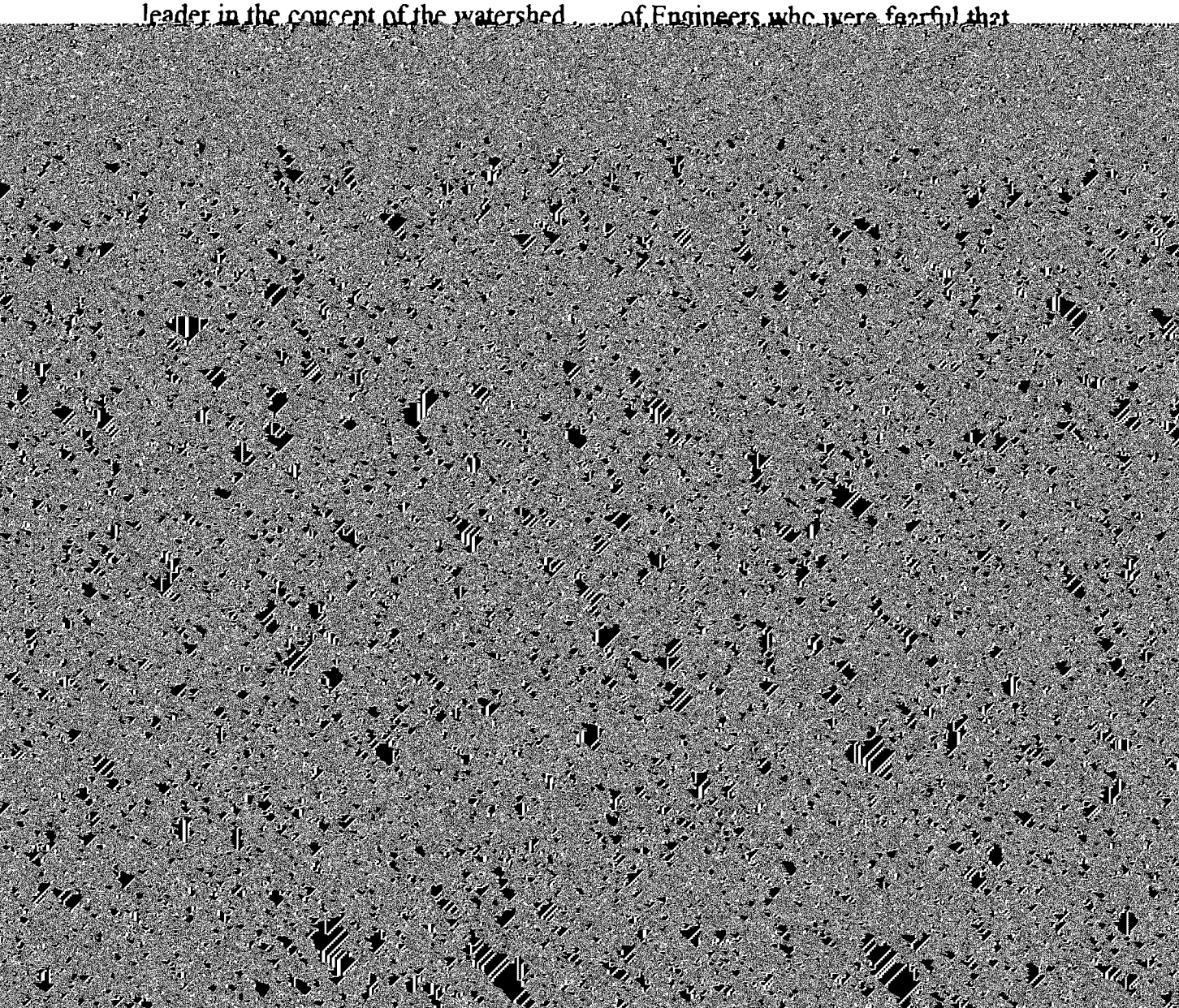
WILLIAMS: Based upon the experience that we already had with the eleven authorized projects, which had gone into operation after World War II, it became evident that soil and water conservation could not be carried out just on individual farms. It

been set up and theoretically they were to be carried out to prove one way or another whether permanent legislation was needed for a Small Watershed Program for flood prevention and water conservation.

However, before the projects were all selected it became evident to some of the members of Congress and some of our own people in consultation with them that legislation was needed. Mr. Carl Brown, particularly, who passed away many years ago, was a strong leader in the concept of the watershed

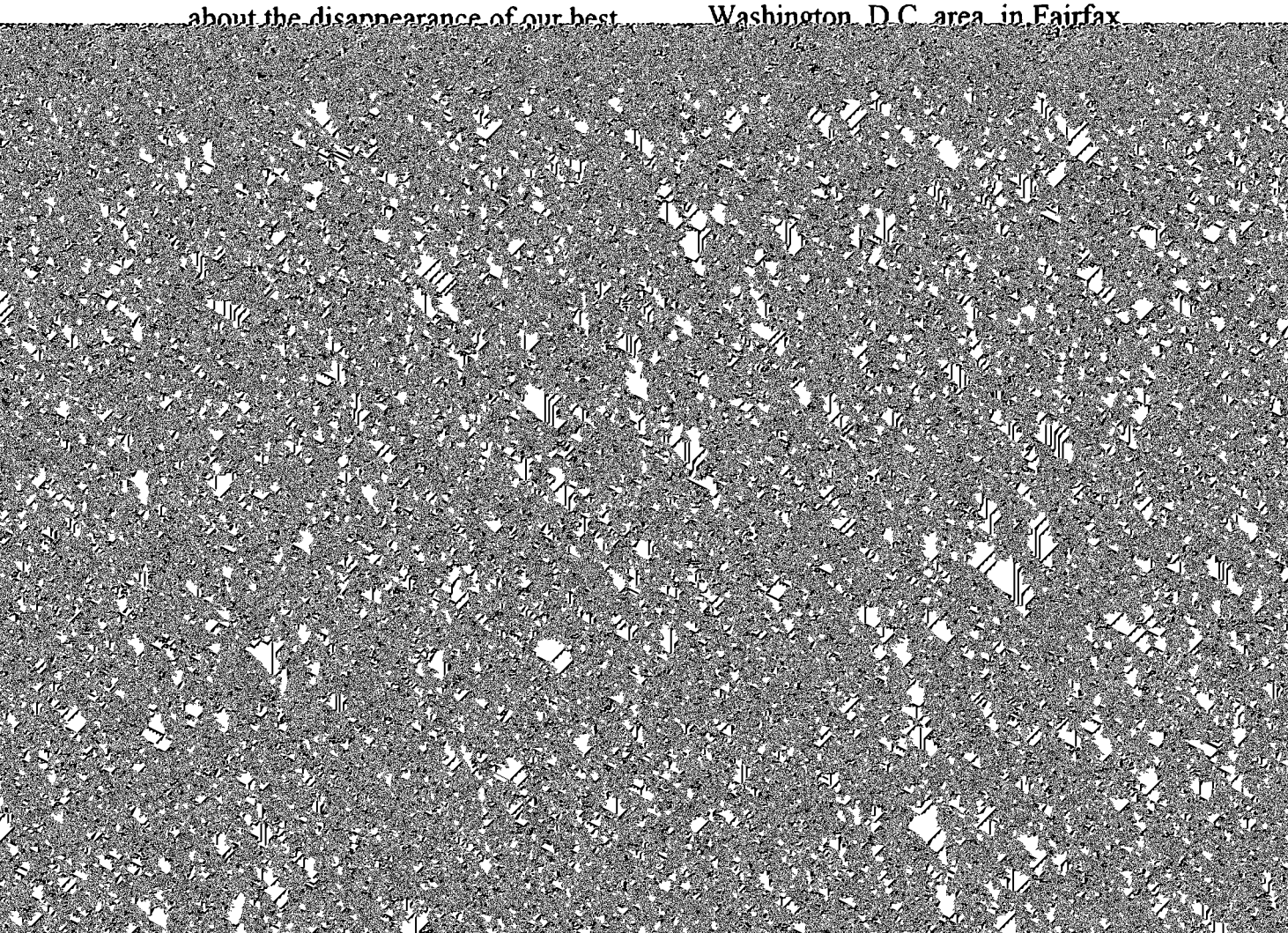
irrigation, drainage work, municipal supply, or fish and wildlife. Those were subsequently added. This legislation was also introduced in the Senate at about the same time. I do not recall the names of the Senators who took the lead on it but I know there was strong interest in it. The legislation was essentially uncontroversial and was passed by the Congress and signed by the President.

There was opposition to it. The opposition to it came from the Corps of Engineers who were fearful that



HELMS: To what extent are you responsible for having SCS work more with suburban and urban clients?

WILLIAMS: I really cannot tell you. I really do not know. It was sort of a combination of recognition by several people. Now, I will say that I did have something to do with it. Way back in the early 1950s--and you can find my original article in *Coronet* magazine--I wrote an article about the disappearance of good agricultural land to nonagricultural uses and the danger of some of our best land getting out of agriculture. This predated by almost thirty, at least twenty-five years, the current concern about the disappearance of our best recreational uses. From that it grew into a strong feeling that the growing suburbia which was gobbling up so much land around the cities needed to do a better job of planning, or a job of planning where none was being done. There were many people including an architect in the Chicago area, John Quay, who had a very strong interest in this matter, who took the lead in working with the Service and helping bring about the concept. There grew over a period of two or three more years a feeling on the part of many soil conservation district leaders and many urban leaders that something more needed to be done on this regard. We had right here in the Washington, D.C. area, in Fairfax



meetings and other meetings representatives of urban areas, representatives of recreational interests such as fish and wildlife, and park interests to express their point of view and talk about the value of land use planning for things in addition to agriculture. Then there were some national conferences held on the subject here in Washington which were instigated by the Service and supported by several agencies of the Department of Agriculture and some in the Department of the Interior. It just evolved over a period of time.

HELMS: What prompted you to initiate the national inventory of conservation needs? Has that program accomplished what you wanted it to?

WILLIAMS: It did in that it was the first step. It seemed to me after I had written this article that appeared in *Coronet* and after doing a lot of thinking about this disappearance of land to nonagricultural uses that we really did not know what was going on in terms of volume. My guess of a million acres was just right out of the blue. I had nothing to go on except some very rough calculations. It appeared to me that we could, by going to our field people and in consultation with local interests--not just soil conservation districts but county officials, state officials and others--get a pretty fair idea of what was going on. From that evolved the idea of a sampling process, a statistically sound sampling process, which would actually select on a scientific basis certain areas of land around the country. You could go out there and find out what in fact the land was being used for. This was done and became the general process. We worked with Iowa State University and some of the other universities on this statistical operation. We did get an inventory. It involved a certain amount of facts, a certain amount of conjecture, and a certain amount of estimating, community by community. I think the national summary was indicative of the direction. I think the regional summaries were also indicative. I think at the state level they were more meaningful, but it had the most meaning and the most accuracy at the county level where local people knew more about what was going on. When you start putting the whole thing together on a state and regional and national basis, obviously it became pretty generalized. But it did this: It helped to create a lot of interest. "If this is anywhere near what is going on, well, we had better know a little more about it. We had better be hurrying up the completion of our soil surveys. We had better find out for sure what is going on."

As it happened, my original guess of a million acres of annual disappearance was only exceeded by a quarter of a million acres. I do not remember the exact figure. It seems to me that it was about a million and a quarter acres of disappearance. At the same time, we found out that there was a lot of awful good land in forest use and

rangeland use that could be used for cropland in case of necessity. There were various categories of use and this was estimated on the basis of land use capabilities. As a starting point, I think it was very much worthwhile.

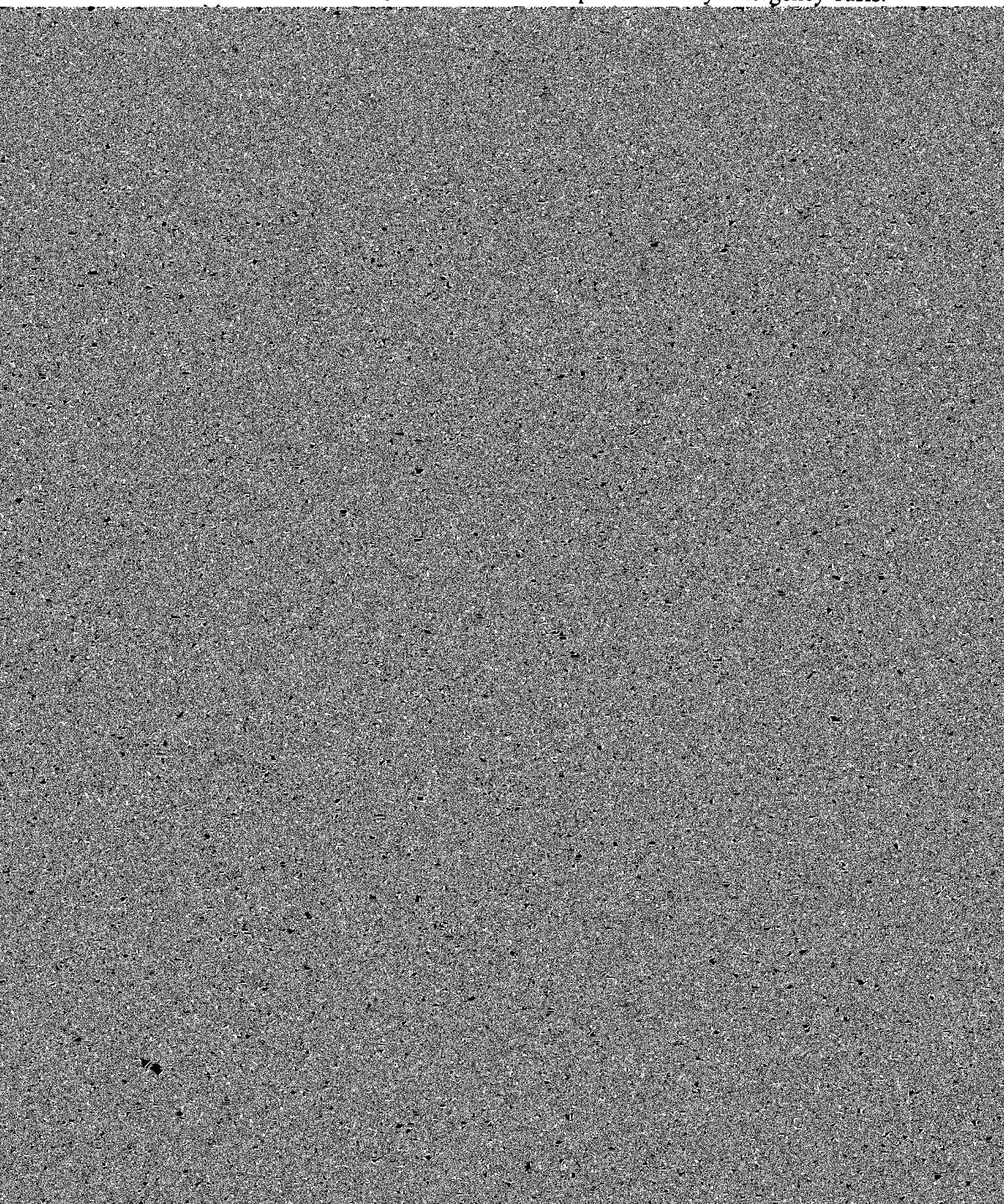
HELMS: Did you try to assess during that whether you were gaining ground or losing ground in getting conservation practices on the land or did you already have a good idea of what was happening in that area?

WILLIAMS: In terms of alerting some people, urban and rural, to the need for land use planning and to the need for conservation not only on a community basis, but on a farm-by-farm basis, I think it was a stimulus. Now I would hate to say how much it brought about but I am sure it did not do any harm. It did some good. How

program that also came into being during the period of my administration. Of course, my administration extended over a period of sixteen years so there were quite a few things happening. This was an outgrowth of the Dust Bowl days back there in the "dirty thirties." I grew up in that part of the world and I knew it firsthand. A lot of the things had been done. The shelterbelt planting had been carried out largely through Forest Service and the emergency activities. There had been some wind erosion demonstration works set up after the big blow. That was the big blow which triggered the creation of the Soil Conservation Service in 1935. Then World War II came along and the big demand for food and fiber. So the word went out. But the word did not need to go out to plow the land because the price of wheat went up

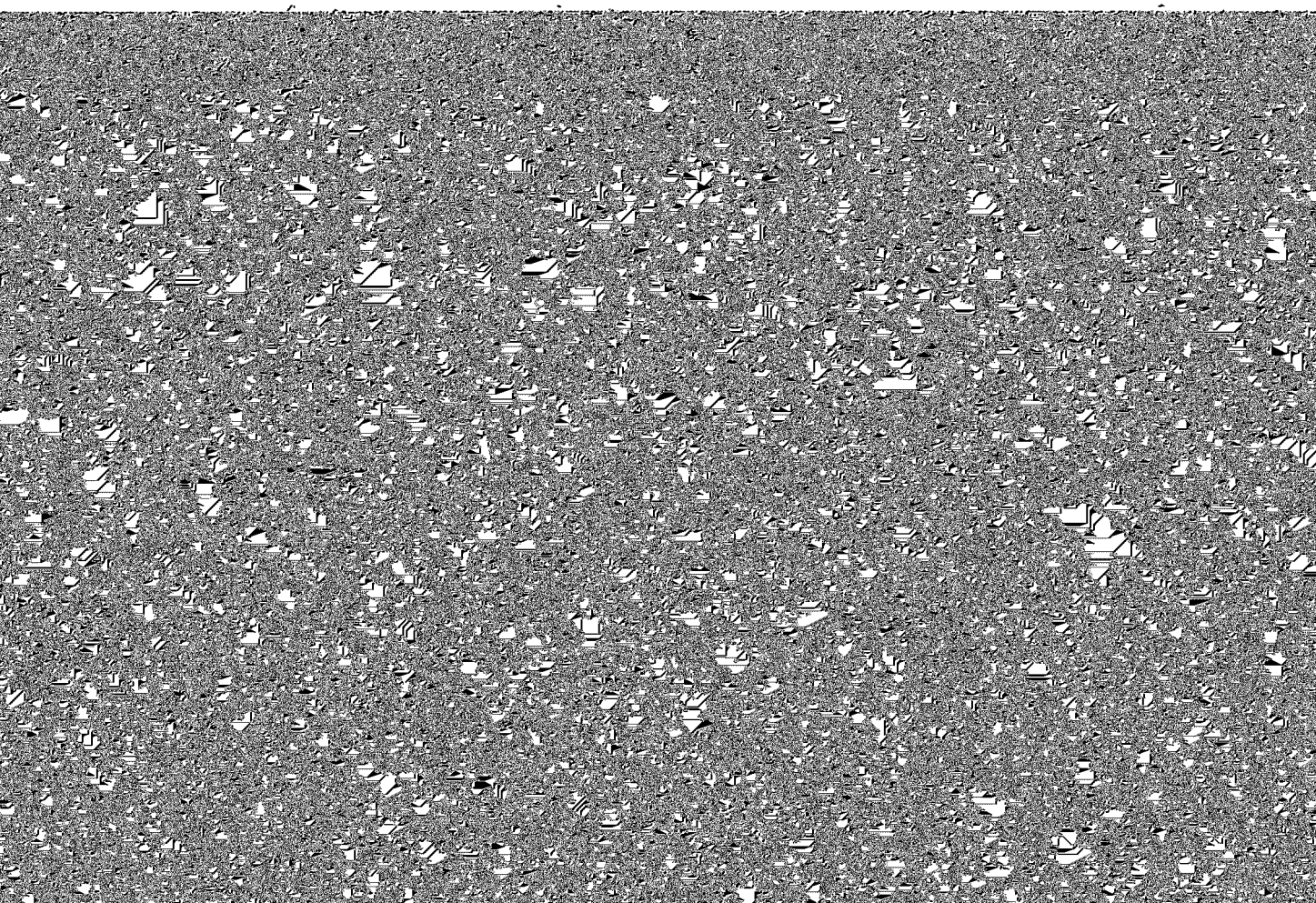
states were heavily involved. I know that they discussed it locally in the

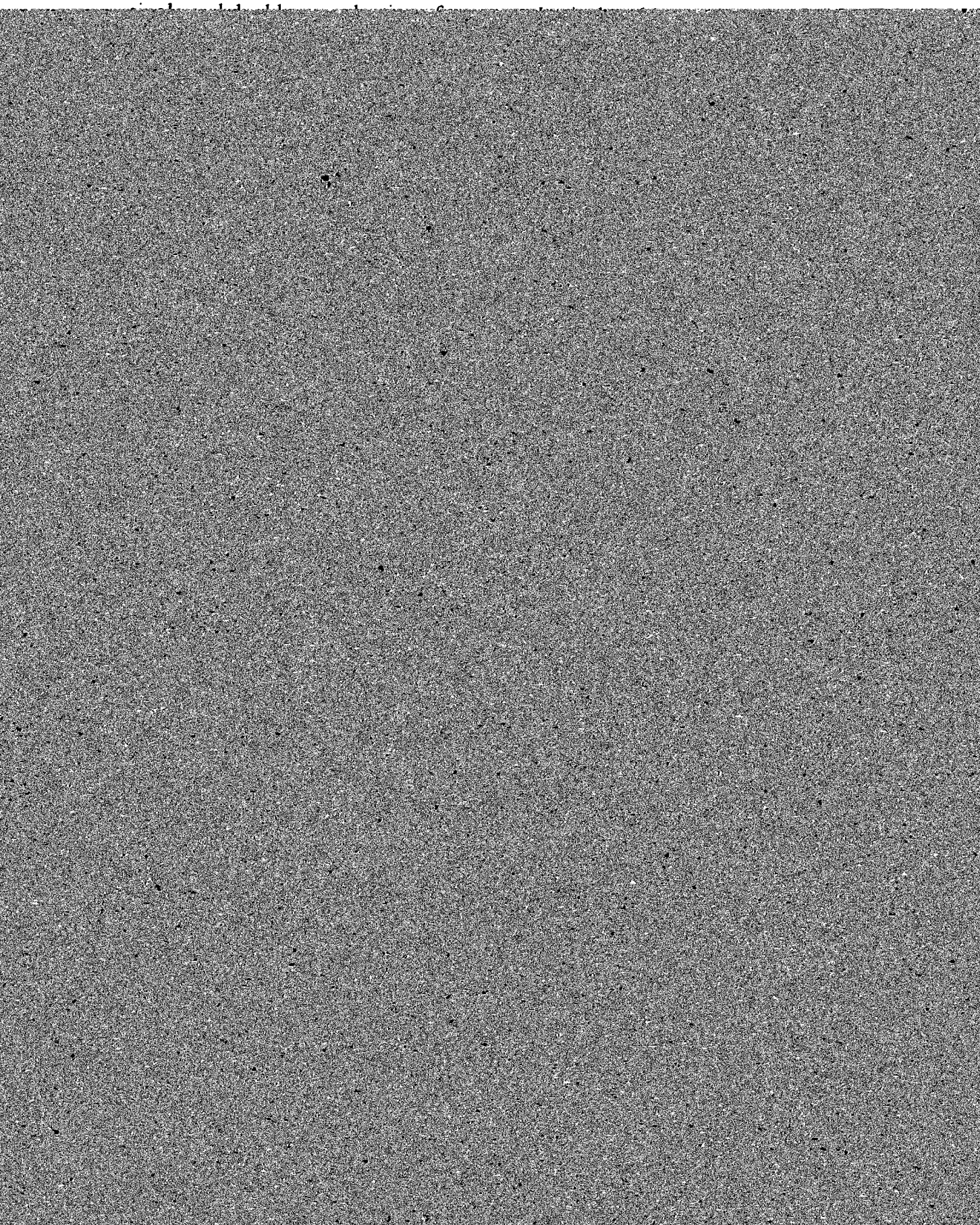
should be used for annual practices except on a strictly emergency basis.



of the Great Plains Program and to the concept that we had in it of cost sharing for enduring or perma-nent type practices rather than temporary practices. He and I traveled through the Great Plains area with some of the congressional representatives of the area to see for ourselves and for him to learn about the problem. We talked with farmers. We talked with district supervisors. We held meetings. We did a lot of different things. He came back 1,000 percent in support of the Great Plains Conservation Program as did Senator Roman Hruska, who up to that time was just an Omaha lawyer who was not much interested in agriculture of any kind, and especially conservation. He came back saying although admittedly we did not bat 100 percent on it by any means. There was some feeling on the part of some soil conservation districts who did not happen to be in the Great Plains area or did not happen to be in an approved watershed that some of the money that should have been coming to their districts was going to somebody else. That was awful hard to prove one way or the other. To the best of our ability, we had a sound basis for the allocation of the funds. The work progressed soundly.

I am satisfied that nearly all the long-term contracts awarded between the government and the farmers, with soil conservation district approval of the





WILLIAMS: Yes, Doug, it is true. so many years. I do believe that during the period of the fifties and

this was decided fairly early in the game. I do not know precisely when the first training centers were established, such as the one at Coshocton, Ohio, which was one of the strong ones. Another one was in Athens, Georgia. Another one was in Nebraska. I do not know exactly the date that those were established. They became very necessary. The first step would be to take the new recruits there for general orientation on what the Soil Conservation Service is all about. "What is its basic authority? What is its function? What is its job? Where do the different pieces fall? Do they fit together? What is soil and water conservation? Is it agronomy? Is it soil management? Is it this?" "Yes, it is all these things but it is all of them put together."

At the same time that we were having these orientation classes, we recognized the need for two additional types of training. One was on-the-job training right out in the field where the man was assigned to a field location, where his supervisor or some person assigned to do it would go with him out in the field and hold him by the hand, so to speak, and take him through the process of how to interpret land and the soils, and how to judge land capability. How to recognize when one kind of grass was needed against another kind of grass or when you needed a grass-legume mixture or how to recognize when range grasses need better management. How to recognize when terracing was needed and how to build terraces. How to lay them out and build them. All of these required on-the-job training.

They also took a second type of group training, advanced training in a professional field. At these same training centers where we gave the orientation training, we set up specialized training in the vegetative field for agronomists, as well as range management and forestry. We trained people to adapt their technology to soil and water conservation farming. Also on engineering techniques. I happened to have graduated as a civil engineer. I grew up on a farm so it was a rather easy transition. I understood agriculture from the beginning. But an awful lot of engineers did not have that kind of background. Therefore, they had it to learn. They had to learn that they were not out there just to do engineering, but they were out there to do a kind of engineering which would support a conservation program and would support or make possible a vegetative program, a land treatment program that would put water into the soil instead of leading it off. There was a need for specialized training of a group nature as well as the general orientation. Who started it? I do not know. I know that I gave it all the support I could muster because I recognized that with all the people that we had if they were not trained to do their jobs they could not do them. I did support it very heavily and heartily.

Part Three: June 14, 1981 Alexandria, Virginia

HELMS: Mr. Williams, who conceived of the idea of the multi-county Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) projects?

WILLIAMS: I can say unequivocally that it was the concept of Secretary Orville Freeman. He had

county and other jurisdictional basis. I had long been convinced that that was true but our appropriations and our directions up to that time had been focused very largely on the soil conservation districts entity approach. Our funds had been appropriated for that purpose. When I agreed that some of these problems could be handled on a multi-county, multi-jurisdictional basis, he said, "Would you be willing to tackle some kind of a demonstration or trial program?" I

in an area where there were problems of land use from a cropland standpoint. They needed conservation on the land. There were problems of private forestry, of farm forests, and commercial forests. Trees were just standing there with no use and there seemed to be many opportunities in the recreation area. Our state conservationist, Mr. Ed Swain, was able to get the soil conservation district directors of three counties together. After discussions with them and discussions with county officials, they agreed to start a pilot project. So that area was selected. Secretary Freeman made a special trip out there to launch the project. That became one of the best projects we ever had because the entire community, the three-county area, was behind it and they did have plenty of problems to work on. The second one was selected in a quite comparable way. It was in the area north of Pittsburgh, in northwestern Pennsylvania. That was a different set of problems and a different combination of political jurisdictions. But the soil conservation districts, and I think there were three of them there, were quite active in leadership. That was a very, very key point.

HELMS: So after you saw the results of some of this he tried to get the legislation enacted?

WILLIAMS: We had the authority to do what we needed to do under the old basic Public Law 46, but the problem was that the Congress and the administration had interpreted this on an individual soil conservation basis. In order to meet some of the problems, we needed to get authority to do some special work in recreational land use areas. In terms of some amendments, the old Bankhead-Jones Act permitted us to do some work on public lands.

HELMS: What are your thoughts now about the RC&D projects? In retrospect would you have done anything different?

WILLIAMS: I think the concept was absolutely sound. I think the beginnings of it were good. But like so many things it sounded to a lot of people like the salvation of all their problems and they wanted to jump into it too quickly--before they were ready. That was true of some of our own personnel as well as some of the soil conservation districts and non-soil conservation district leaders like city mayors, councils, and college officials who saw an opportunity, or thought they did, to get a hold of some federal money to do some things. They came up with some grandiose ideas and they brought enough pressure to bear to get areas designated that were really not ready for it. They were really too big to be handled in a homogeneous fashion. The Soil Conservation Service was not equipped to handle them. I think that the program began to bog down or became static, so to speak, when it got away from the smaller homogeneous areas where local leadership could get together rather frequently and discuss the